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ABSTRACT

Students cannot trace all the sources that inform who they are at a given moment, but all of them can explore a wide range of sources that inform their sense of self, clarify their values and their relationships to the world and others in it. Writing about family fits especially well into a sequence in which students narrate a personal experience, describe a hero, interview someone who is "different," compose a source-assisted report, and write an overall evaluation of themselves as writers. Students can do any or all of these things writing about family history. Such exercises remove history from the privileged ranks of scholars; they give students a chance to create a space for the other, to write their families "in" by digging into their pasts and sharing it with present readers who also have a stake in it. A personal family history is offered as well as a world wide web address which focuses on genealogy and composition. Contains 10 references. (TB)

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Writing the 'Self' into History: Creating a Personal Legacy from Family Archives, Genealogical Research and Historical Documents

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None of our students can trace all the sources that inform who they are at a given moment, but all of them can explore a wide range of sources that inform their sense of self, clarify their values, and their relationships to the world and others in it. They can explore these topics by pursuing already existing patterns in composition courses. For example, Bruce Leland's Freshman composition textbook at Western Illinois University, "Discovery," identifies a writing sequence in which students narrate a personal experience, complete a meditation about a place, describe a hero, interview someone who is "different," compose a source-based report, and write an overall evaluation of themselves as writers, or at least, an evaluation of how their writing personae have developed during the semester course.

Transparency 1: Activities

Writing about family history fits this kind of sequence especially well because students can meditate on significant events, persons, or sites, write about family members as heroes and heroines, find "difference" in the family's eccentric members, interview elders, siblings, neighbors and friends, and conduct research galore. But what do I mean about "creating a legacy" and "writing the self into history? First of all, I mean interpreting family history and creating a discursive space for the excluded "others" that describe most of us in traditional history.

Valeria Wagner defines history as "a privileged institution for the constitution of a collective memory to ground the "identity" of a nation. The actual making of a national history implies the "killing" (whether by wars, epidemics, exploitation, marginalized status--or omission of non-central figures, who have participated in its making while being excluded from its historical accounts" (Wagner 1). H.D. Harootunian argues that at the heart of traditional Western history, "identity can be secured only at the price of deferring difference indefinitely. . .though a series of exclusions" (115). Otherness becomes everything that finds no role to

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play in a linear and progressive history, and can never make a contribution to its end.

Historians compose master narratives from political ideological perspectives that convey views and values about who and what ought to compose the identity of a nation. Allan Megill refers to what he calls "hermeneutic naivete," as the viewing of an historical account as if it were a "view" from nowhere," instead of—as it decidedly is—a view from some particular interpretive perspective" (66) What I'm asking my students to do is to account for the narratives they construct by mediating the interests of the audiences and the purposes they assign to their various narratives. In short, as Foucault suggests, I want them to create a space for the other (117), to write their families 'in' by digging into their past and sharing it with present readers who also have a stake in it.

Transparency 2: Sources

Dominick LaCapra argues that, "The historian enters into a 'conversational' exchange with the past and with other inquirers seeking an understanding of it" (30). A 'conversation' with the past involves the historian in argument and even polemic—both with others and within the self—over approaches to understanding that are bound up with institutional and political issues. It is also this case with students who inquire about family history because the activity of writing family history occurs within the context of a family conversanity that envisions multiple versions of that history, including the exclusion of parts of that history.

Foucault argues that we are created by, as Ellen Quandahl puts it, "perusing investigating, interpreting, enrolling, examining, interviewing and documenting (Quandahl 1). And that's what I ask my students to do with themselves and their families as their subject. Obviously, there are lots of sources to search.

Transparency 3: WEB links

All of us have histories but not all of us have examined and written them. Our ancestors underwent experiences that made them who there were. We inherit a legacy from them—often of valor or faith or achievement or endurance. But a legacy is how we interpret it—how we compose it. Ander, this project asks students to consider the people and

incidents that compose the legacy they are shaping for their unborn children and as yet unknown significant others, and that they will share with their parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and family friends. I give them the task of considering what it means to carry their names into the future.

Like my students, I have stories to discover, events to reconstruct, people to honor, and audiences of children and other relatives, a local historical society, and genealogists who are interested in reading about my family and how it has been shaped. This is one of my stories.

Kenneth Crawford Mary Crawford

In 1937 at age 24, Mary Meade took care of her ailing father, a rural mail carrier who had retired in 1930 after delivering approximately three million letters and who had trained his horse to stop at every postbox and to move on when it heard the click of the box being closed (CN). Del Meade, whose wife had died during a tuberculosis epidemic in 1924 ,was no longer able to fully take care of himself and his home and so his youngest daughter, Mary, accepted these duties.

At age 28, Kenneth Crawford lived three blocks away with his parents and two brothers and two sisters and provided them with a much needed income by operating a small trucking business. His father had been pulled from a coal mine explosion in which he lost an eye and soon developed a heart condition. Fluid was removed from his heart in 1930 in an emergency operation that occured on their kitchen table and without anesthetics (Hart). He was told to never do hard labor or go underground

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again. Both Mary and Kenny believed that they could not abandon their family duties to begin their own family.

But love was too strong to ignore. On June 27, 1937, Kenneth Crawford and Mary Meade eloped. They kept the marriage a secret for almost a year. During that year, Kenneth stopped at the Meade home every morning before beginning his day of hauling coal in winter, rock in summer. He usually arrived at 5:00 a.m. and Mary had a hot breakfast waiting. This was about the only time they had to themselves. "Breakfast chats," as they called them, became an important routine. On a warm day in May when Kenneth thought no one was home but Mary, he rushed into the house and stood at the bottom of the stairway, calling, "Is there a Mrs. Crawford here? Mr. Crawford is calling." At that time, Helen Meade, who was married to Mary's younger brother, Bob, stepped out from the living room, mouth open, and the secret was out (Meade). However, their plans to start a family were being shaped by world events.

Kenneth reported for induction into the U.S. Army on January 20, 1944 to Fort Sheridan, Chicago. Mary, with help from her oldest brother, Bill, began to operate his trucking business.

By February, Kenneth was stationed in Camp Blanding, Florida. In his letter to Mary, Postmarked February 11, he wrote: "I wake up thinking of you and you're my last thought at night. I'm drilling--my mind wanders back to you, causing embarrassing moments as I'm then out of step. This life makes me realize more what a good home kept by a good wife really means to me, and how much I really love you and would like to be with you."

He arrived in Europe on August 12, assigned to the 179th Infantry Regiment 45th Infantry Division.

His parents wrote him on October 4, 1944.

Just a few lines to let you know everyone is all right. Mom is baking cookies for the USO today. We sent you a small Xmas package last week, not much but all we could send. Then, Monday, we sent you a can of chicken, a jar of peach butter, and glass of jelly. Hope they reach you okay."

Kenneth wrote to his brother, Lowell, from France, on Nov. 10, 1944.. He said: It's pretty rough over here, too much to suit me, and

these little battlefield promotions were rather high. You know, in the morning you can be a rifleman, by evening you might be taking a sergeant's place, things move fast sometimes."

Mary and Kenneth continued to write each other on average every other day. In December, Mary didn't receive the letter she expected on Monday, nor again on Wednesday, nor again on Friday, nor the following Monday. Instead, her unopened letters began coming back to her with a message stamped on the outside. It said, "Missing."

Deloris Hart, Kenneth's sister, sent a western Union cable to their brother and his wife, Lowell and Florence Crawford on December 21. It read simply: "Received telegram this morning, Kenneth missing in action since December 9th. No further details. Mother, Dad, & Mary all right. Doctor was here and told Dad. Will wire if we hear more." They didn't.

Mary wrote to Florence and Lowell on January 2, 1945, and explained, "I haven't written -- I just wouldn't let myself think Kenny was lost from me and have felt that we would hear. Almost every breath is a prayer for Kenny. Surely all our prayers and Faith will bring him back."

The family received no additional information from the war department until April 30 at which time it was disclosed that: "On 8 December 1944, your husband was serving with his company, which had captured and occupied a factory area in the vicinity of Brichebuillen, France. In the middle of the night, the enemy counterattacked, eventually surrounding the building where he was last seen, and cut off its occupants from contact with the remainder of the company. The Germans entered and searched the building, then withdrew to neighboring positions.

"Since then, no further word has been received at this headquarters regarding his status, and while the evidence cannot be considered as conclusive, it is not unreasonable to believe that your husband was captured" (Hull).

Kenneth was marched across Germany in December and interned at Stalag 4 G, Oshatz, Germany. In February while at Stalag IV , a German SS corporeman tossed a shrapnel explosive into the cell occupied by Kenneth. Dozens of metal slivers embedded his skin and infection followed, accompanied by high fever, severe chills and swelling. After three days, he was covered with open sores and his face was so swollen

he couldn't see or swallow food. On the fourth, he went in and out of consciousness.

Meanwhile, Mary waited to hear if her husband was captured, or dead. In mid-April, she received a postcard in the mail. On the back with her address was stamped Stalag IV G. On the front was an ink drawing of Kenneth by a Dutch artist and fellow prisoner. The picture conveyed an answer to her prayers: her husband was alive.

Kenneth Crawford--drawing by a Dutch artist in a prisoner-of-war camp was sent as a post card to Mary Crawford to let her know he was alive.

A German guard, who had come to know Kenneth, appeared one evening after his duty ended and arranged to take Kenneth to a base hospital where a doctor waited. The doctor stayed with him all evening, dressed his wounds, and ordered nurses to keep an around-the-clock watch until his fever broke. Their efforts saved his life.

There is so much more to tell. Family history and personal history are so rich; the choice is to select and limit. But I think what's most important is not to narrate a history that conforms to textbook accounts but to create a legacy that can be shared with current family and community members as well as future others -- a legacy that carries with it values and beliefs and pride and love. It's a project that not only interests students and their parents; it's a project that by its nature, makes meaning public, writing purposeful, audiences real, expertise genuine, and writer persona a changing, self-conscious construction.

A World Wide Web address for anyone who is interested in reading more about what I'm doing with genealogy and composition is: http://www.EONet.Net/users/mfw/wbu/index.html.

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